TELEPHONIC ROMANCE

By AMY DUPREE

"Two hundred thirty-four J don't answer," said central, ringing off, but before she could lean back for an instant's breathing spell 719 M called her up again.

"Central, why can't I get my house?"

"I'm sure I don't know," she answered, with a suspicion of laughter in her voice.

"I'll bet those confounded servants are gossiping down in the basement. Ring 'em again, and ring 'em like thunder."

Central obeyed his orders energetically, but without results.

"I can't get any answer," she said gently to the irate man at the other end of the line, "but I'll try them again in a few minutes, and if I get an answer I'll call you up. No, I won't forget," she said, almost before the man had uttered his warning. "I know you call the house every morning from your office."

"Thank you," said the man, much mollified. "Those servants are so careless, and my niece, who looks after the children, is confined to her room by illness."

Circleville's telephone system was not very complicated. The three girls who presided in the central office were not kept occupied as in a larger city because this was a new institution in the pretty inland city and subscribers were not coming in fast enough to satisfy the telephone company. Only one of the girls hailed from Circleville. The other two were from Chicago, and it was Margaret Baxter, one of the Chicago girls, who had answered Mr. Dickson's imperative calls.

For the next few minutes she was kept busy plugging in and out on her board. But all the time a queer little smile hovered about her lips and a light almost tender shone in her eyes.

"It would be very funny," she said to herself, "if it should all be straightened out by telephone, and I would not be at all surprised if that is just what Jack hoped for." Then she turned suddenly and rang up 234 J.

A rather thick voice with a distinct brogue answered this call with a sullen "Hello." Margaret's face turned grave and firm lines showed about her mouth.

"Why has no one answered the telephone?" she said rather sternly. "I have been ringing you on and off for fifteen minutes."

"Sure I've somethin' to do beside runnin' up them stairs to answer this bell. It's a wonder a woman can't eat her breakfast in peace."

Margaret connected 234 J with 719 M, sighing softly to herself, "Poor Charley and his babies at the mercy of that woman."

The conversation at the wire claimed her attention. There were reasons why she felt she had a right to listen.

"Hello, Mary, is this you?"

"Yes, sir."

"How is Master Reginald?"

"Fine, sir."

"What did he eat for his breakfast?"

"A peach, a bowl of rice and milk and five cakes."

"Now, Mary, I've told you repeatedly not to let him have hot cakes."

"Then, sir, you'll have to stay at home and keep him from it. It's a cook I am and no nurse."

"Well, well," said the man anxiously, as one who realized he was in a predicament and needed the good will of every one. "I'm sure while Miss Ellen is sick you will look after the children, and I will not forget it when I pay you next week."

This bit of diplomacy elicited no reply from the other end of the wire.

"Has Miss Bessie gone to school?"

"She has not. Sure the string's off her hood and one of her rubbers is lost entirely, and I told her she'd best stay home till her Aunt Ellen could get about."

"Dear, dear," said the man, and a prodigious sigh seemed to choke his utterance.

"Is that all, sir?" said the woman impatiently.

"I guess so," he replied reluctantly and hung up his receiver.

At her end of the wire the woman slammed up the receiver with a crash which made central flush just a bit angrily. Clump, clump, clump, she went down the basement stairway to meet a look of inquiry on the face of her husband, gardener and man of all work for Henry Dickson, president of the Excelsior Hardware company.

"Sure, it's the same old thing," she said snappishly as she tossed the soap into the dish pan. "Frettin' his soul out about those two children. It's no place for me and you, Tim. Either the old man or the young un ought to marry. What with church and parthies and a fly be night nature into the bargain, Miss Ellen's no good at all, at all. When she's in the house she's in bed, and when she's not in bed she's out of the house."

Tim shook his head and marched out to the stable, and Mary turned to face a shrinking little figure in the doorway.

"I want to sit behind the stove, Mary. There's no fire in the library, and I'm cold all over."

"I'll bet the young un's goin' to be sick," said Mary as she made room for the child on the wood box behind the stove. "She ought to had on her warm flannels last week. Sit there, dear, whilst I tell you about the fairies Paddy O'Glyn met on his way to Donegal fair."

The man at the other end of the line had been leaning back in a chair, staring up at the ceiling. Finally he called his stenographer and dictated a letter. It was addressed to Charles Dickson and wound up as follows:

"While you're in Chicago I wish you would stop in to see your aunt Mary Graves. Things are not going right at the house, I fear. Ellen is too frivolous and fond of society to do what is entirely right by us and the children. Your aunt Mary is a capable woman and would pull things together in less than no time."

But even with the letter started on its way Mr. Dickson felt uneasy. Aunt Mary was capable, but was she sympathetic enough to deal with those children? He recalled the gentle ways and the fair face of the dead daughter-in-law. He wished somehow Aunt Mary would wave her hair about her face and smile once in awhile. But she was better than the more uncertain element he had dreaded—a stepmother for his beloved grandchildren.

And all the time Margaret Baxter sat in front of the switchboard, plugging the jacks and thinking. Just before he closed up his desk to go home Mr. Dickson was surprised to catch her voice with a new, almost friendly accent.

"Is this Mr. Dickson?"

"Yes."

"Shall I call Mary and tell her to have the children come down to meet you?"

Mr. Dickson lived some distance beyond the street car terminus, and Tim always drove down in the runabout to meet him. It never struck him as odd that the telephone girl knew of his daily habit. Perhaps she lived in the neighborhood. He answered in a relieved tone:

"Yes; I'd forgotten to call her."

"And if you didn't call her she wouldn't remember, would she?"

"No, no," agreed the man; "these servants are a great trial." Then as central rang off he murmured to himself: "There's a girl who will make a fine business woman some day. I would not mind having her in my office."

And, though he could never tell just how it happened, from that time on it was central who had the trying conversation with Mary until Miss Ellen got about, and after that with Miss Ellen herself, merely giving him a condensed report of the conversation. This saved his time, which was valuable, and it pleased his fancy that some one appreciated his absorbing interest in the children.

That was why he had a bouquet of flowers sent up to the telephone exchange one day and a box of candy another. Several times he was tempted to call in person, but he finally decided that seeing the girl face to face might prove a disillusion. Faces and voices do not always harmonize, and yet he thought of the great relief it was to receive messages from central instead of irate Mary or butterfly Ellen. He felt sure that this particular voice stood for a face fair and womanly. Then he would recall a recent letter from his son, Aunt Mary would come for—a consideration.

But finally an inspiration came to him. Reggie was having a birthday. Ellen, with characteristic heedlessness, had forgotten this important event and had arranged to join a house party for the very night. But this should not stand in the way of a proper observance of the occasion. Reggie should have a birthday spree, and the guest of honor should be this central girl, with whom the two children had held many little talks across the wire.

She accepted the invitation sent in Reggie's name. She rode out in the runabout driven by the suspicious Tim, who had made unpleasant remarks to his wife about old fools and pretty girls. And she finally entered the door opened by Mr. Dickson himself.

He gave a sigh of relief, which was drowned in the tumultuous greetings of the children. She was just what he had dreamed of, but what he had not dared to hope for. They had a merry evening, and when the two children were sitting down, one on either side of her, to hear what Reggie described as corking goblin stories, the sound of a latchkey fell upon Mr. Dickson's ear.

He rose uncertainly; so did Margaret Baxter, and so did the two children. And that was the scene upon which entered Charles Dickson, general representative for the Excelsior Hardware company, just returned from a hard trip on the road. He looked at his father, who flushed. He looked at Margaret Baxter, who smiled. He looked at the two children, who shrieked simultaneously and made a rush at him.

When he had escaped from their embraces his father started to make the necessary introduction, but the younger man waved him aside.

"I have known Margaret for some time—in fact, long before you knew her. When the children have finished their frolic and gone to bed I—well, we will explain this matter to you."

Mr. Dickson, Sr., looked from his son's dancing eyes to Margaret Baxter's flushed face and remarked dryly:

"It won't be necessary. And while Miss Baxter is finishing that goblin story you had better telegraph to Aunt Mary. Tell her she need not come. We've changed our minds."

Sleeping Time.

A New York physician gives the following as his ideas of the pace that kills:

"Every man that does not take at least eight hours' sleep out of every twenty-four is robbing himself of just that much vital energy. The men who in the future will live to be 100 years old will take more than eight hours' sleep every day of their lives. Man cannot burn the candle at both ends because nature will not permit him to do it."